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STEWARD UPDATE

STRATEGIC FLOCKING



Solidarity
Tactics that
Work



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Strategic Flocking:

Stewards are tasked with wrestling with some pretty big strategy questions. For instance:

- How do we ask the public (or our co-workers) “which side are you on?” in a way that brings them closer rather than pushing them away?
- How do we systematically understand the power of management (and big business) in a way that lets us take it apart, piece by piece?
- How do we recruit the number of member volunteers our movement needs to grow quickly, given our limited resources? Whom should we ally with, and how do we do it in a way that lasts beyond the next political deal?
- How do we address, head-on and together, injustice in workers’ experience, including race and gender issues?
- How do we set goals that are inspiring and meaningful enough for people to want to join us? Can we really ask for the world we want, not just something that’s a little better than today?
- How do we find new ways (or rediscover old ways) to be in solidarity, especially when so much around us is so divisive?
- What does all this mean about the grievances we need to file, the safety checks we need to perform, and the day-to-day work of keeping our union going?

In the last year, leaders from the Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, climate justice movements and the Bernie Sanders campaign have published a series of books that wrestle with those questions and more. Connecting their experiences to our own can help us strengthen our leadership and build worker power on the job and everywhere else we need it—which is everywhere.

SNAPSHOTS FROM NEW ORGANIZING BOOKS

THIS IS AN UPRISING

Brothers Mark and Paul Engler lay out a clear, step-by-step explanation of how nonviolent direct action can be deployed to challenge powerful and oppressive social forces, even in the face of government repression. Using examples from the civil rights, lesbian and gay rights, environmental, and global democracy movements, the authors show how moments of

previously unthinkable progressive change were deliberately built and directed by disciplined organizers. While respectful of slow, institution-based organizing, they propose that a different kind of “momentum-based” mass organizing is needed in today’s volatile political environment. Their argument, supported by detailed case studies, is a constructive challenge for activists more familiar with highly structured union work.

EMERGENT STRATEGY

adrienne maree brown, a facilitator for the Movement for Black Lives and other progressive organizations, makes the case for an organizing approach rooted in deep relationships, small-scale modeling of the changes

we seek, and quick adaptation to changing conditions. “We have to create futures where everyone doesn’t have to be the same kind of person,” she proposes. brown’s description of “strategic flocking,” comparing birds in flight to a team of organizers moving separately yet together in the same direction, typifies the inspiring metaphors that she uses to describe her organizing vision. The second half of the book includes practical group and individual assessment questions and a useful set of meeting and decision-making facilitation tools.

HEGEMONY HOW-TO

Jonathan Smucker draws on lessons from his experience as a core member of Occupy Wall Street and from

his background organizing in rural Pennsylvania to argue for preaching beyond the choir of already convinced activists. He shows how Occupy’s “we are the 99% versus the 1%” messaging created a communications frame that millions of people outside the activist core connected to. He also argues that Occupy’s prioritization of internal process contributed to its challenges building long-term organization. His big picture ideas about the strengths and weaknesses of today’s

activist culture can be adapted for worksite and union-wide organizing.

RULES FOR REVOLUTIONARIES—HOW BIG ORGANIZING CAN CHANGE EVERYTHING

Becky Bond and Zack Exley tell the story of how they built a massive volunteer base for the Bernie Sanders campaign. No matter what you think of Sanders, what the campaign accomplished was impressive. Faced with a

short time frame and limited resources, Bond and Exley’s team created a “distributed organizing” model that used digital tools to recruit activists and immediately put them to work leading others on the ground. Key to their success was the fact that Sanders’ ambitious political platform motivated everyday people to volunteer. The book breaks their experience into easily digestible rules and case studies that stewards can pick and choose from to inform their work.

USEFUL AT MANY LEVELS

The strength of each of these books is that they’re written by people who have actually done the work—and that their movements are aligned with unions, even

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Solidarity Tactics that Work

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if many union members may not be familiar with them. Stewards, union staff, and other worker leaders will get value out of any level of engagement that time allows. Pick and choose useful chapters, read the whole book, or read them all together. Discuss with friends. Experiment with new

tools in the day-to-day work of grievances, safety checks, and other steward work. Keep what works, leave what doesn't. Let us know what you learn so we can share it with other stewards, and let us know what answers you develop to the questions they raise.

Editor's note: As you test out these strategies, or talk about them with your coworkers, we want to hear what you're learning. Email UCS at stewardupdate@unionist.com; UCS welcomes stewards—and others—to write for Steward Update and the UCS blog, www.unionist.com.

—Hays Witt is a longtime union and community organizer who lives in the Pacific Northwest.

ADVICE FROM AN EXPERIENCED LABOR LAWYER, PART TWO

Labor lawyer Ken Page is Steward Update's newest contributor. Here, he offers two more pieces of advice around grievance handling. (We had part one in the previous issue). You can see it all at www.unionist.com.

3 DO A THOROUGH INVESTIGATION—AS FAST AS POSSIBLE. It is critical to the entire process that the union fully investigate all events leading up to any dispute—whether it's management imposing unwarranted discipline or when a union activist finds contract violations or workplace safety issues.

Time matters: it's important that the investigation happen as quickly as possible, especially if there are independent witnesses who might know any facts, details and issues surrounding an arbitration.

First, identify and talk to witnesses as soon as possible. Try to get a detailed, written statement. Usually this means you interview the person, take really good notes, and then write it up for them to review, but it's also okay if they write it and you review it. Either way, it's important that they read it carefully, make any changes they need to, and then sign and date each sheet of the statement.

Second, you should also determine what else—like documentary or physical

evidence—will help your case. That might include photographs, videos, or audio; a copy of work rules or procedures; any incident reports (filed with the employer, with government agencies, or with law enforcement); and any relevant contract provisions and previous arbitration decisions that might deal with similar facts and issues. Often, your union lawyer can help with the last.

Keep excellent notes, take pictures where allowed and appropriate, keep as many of your colleagues in the loop as you can (you might need a communications chain, like a phone tree or a group text, you might want a secure website to send updates, or you might just make a point of talking to everyone you can—it depends on your workplace, its size, your culture, etc.)

4 IN DISCIPLINE CASES MAKE SURE MEMBERS KNOW TO ASK FOR A REPRESENTATIVE—THIS VARIES BY COUNTRY.

In both the US and Canada: In the process leading to potential discipline, the boss often asks the worker to attend a meeting before deciding whether to institute discipline. Members must affirmatively assert their desire (in the US, it's a right) to have union representation in any meeting with the boss that could lead to discipline.

The employer has no obligation to allow representation **unless the member asks for it.** That's why it's so important that all workers know they need to ask.

In the US: These rights are known as "Weingarten rights" and generally apply in both the public and private sector. *Never assume members know about their Weingarten rights and their responsibility to request representation.*

Once, I represented a unit of lawyers—and was shocked to learn they often were not aware of their own Weingarten rights and, of course, were participating in meetings without a steward or union leader. Even lawyers need to know their rights!

In Canada: Unlike Weingarten rights in the United States, Canadian law does not guarantee workers the right to union steward representation in investigatory interviews. However, most Canadian collective bargaining agreements do. If there is such a provision the contract, the boss must inform employees of their right to have a shop steward present at least 24 hours prior to the interview. Workers who choose to waive their right to union representation generally must do so in writing. If the employee has not waived his or her right to union representation and the interview takes place without a union steward present, any discipline resulting from information gathered at the interview will be overturned as void during arbitration.

In July of this year, Amazon founder and CEO Jeff Bezos became the richest man in modern history. While his fortune now exceeds \$150 billion, Amazon employees face low wages, brutal workloads, inability to take time off and, crucially, union busting. The month Bezos became the world's richest man, however, was also the month that thousands of Amazon workers in different European countries jointly stood up against him through strikes and slowdowns. As a result, this year's Amazon Prime Day (July 16) set a new record—an unprecedented level of protesting.

The July protests that took place in Spain, Germany and Poland were not the first of their kind in Europe. The first-ever strikes against Amazon were waged by German workers as early as 2013. Although these strikes resulted in regular raises, Amazon refused to codify the slightly improved working conditions in collective bargaining agreements. Moreover, the company's 2015 expansion into Poland, where labor laws are relatively lax and unions' rights limited, threatened to undermine the effectiveness of future strikes in Germany. To prevent Amazon's divide and conquer strategy from succeeding, German and Polish activists have since met in a number of cross-border meetings to coordinate their efforts.

Such transnational cooperation, in various cases facilitated by the global labor federation UNI, has already played an important role in the organization of strike action elsewhere in Europe. In November 2017, striking Amazon workers in Italy were joined by members of the German services union Verdi for a two-day work stoppage. The effectiveness of cross-border solidarity became clear soon after, when Italian unions successfully negotiated wage increases and worktime protections through Amazon's first-ever collective bargaining agreement. Another example of transnational coordination between Amazon employees is the activist platform Amazing Workers, which brings together Amazon workers from different European countries under the slogan "united across borders," to discuss strategies. Then, this year on April 24, Amazing Workers organized a rally in Berlin to protest Bezos' reception of the Axel Springer Award, which lauded the CEO's "visionary entrepreneurship."

Workers vs. Bezos

The European strike in July had its roots in Spain, where a group of Amazon workers called for a national strike to "gain back a collective agreement that enshrines our historical rights and sets better working conditions, as we deserve." On March 21 and 22, according to the majority union for Amazon workers at the national level (the Confederación Sindical de Comisiones Obreras), more than 95% of Spanish Amazon workers supported the strike. Amazon reportedly responded to the strike with reprisals, and by firing a number of temporary workers. While the Spanish workers were not easily intimidated and have since continued to pressure Amazon, they also recognized that the company would most likely employ its operations in other parts of Europe to counter the effect of strikes and protests in Spain. Consequently, a group of Madrid-based workers issued a statement positing that European Amazon employees' could improve their working conditions only "if we struggle together." At the same time, they argued, action at the European level was the only way to encourage and help workers in Amazon centers without union representation to organize. To realize the potential of joining forces across borders, the group therefore called for a Europe-wide strike in July under the name "Amazon en Lucha." In Germany, their call was met by approximately 2,400 workers at six of Amazon's fulfillment centers in the country, out of a total of about 12,000 employees. In Spain itself, 1,000 out of 1,600 workers participated in the three-day strike. Although strict labor laws prevented Amazon workers in Poland from taking part in the strike, many of the company's Polish employees staged a work-to-rule. In addition to the actions in Germany, Spain and Poland, Amazon workers in the United Kingdom marched in a trade union festival that coincided with the strike, holding signs reading "We Are Humans, Not Robots." And finally, in Italy, workers union Fisacat declared its solidarity with the strikers.

In response to the strikes and protests against its treatment of workers, Amazon did not acknowledge the workers' grievances. Instead, a spokesperson claimed that the company is "a fair and responsible employer," committed to "ensuring a fair cooperation with all our employees, including positive working conditions and a caring and inclusive environment."

Despite this commitment to responsible employment and fair cooperation, the working conditions of Amazon workers across Europe have shown little to no signs of improvement. In response, during Black Friday (November 23), a second European strike took place. In the US, meanwhile, news outlets reported that American workers—East African immigrants in the Midwestern state of Minnesota—were the first to force Amazon to negotiate in that country. The workers protest also began around Prime Day, which coincided this year with Ramadan. Now, the workers at the fulfillment center there are threatening to strike during the company's busiest season—just before Christmas—if management refuses to address workers' concerns about the pace of work and worker treatment.

It remains to be seen, of course, what the European Amazon workers' cross-border action will result in. One thing seems certain: activists' ability to mobilize thousands of workers in different countries is very encouraging for anyone who disagrees with Amazon's self-proclaimed status as a fair employer. Indeed, if labor is to maintain its historical position as effective defender of working people's rights, unionists have to take inspiration from the transnational cooperation pioneered by the German, Spanish and Polish Amazon employees mentioned in this article. Global companies like Amazon use global tactics—workers have to do the same.

—Casper Gelderblom is a member of the European Trade Union Confederation's Youth Committee and a postgraduate student in Political Thought at the University of Cambridge.

New Ways to Welcome New Workers

Remember your first day on the job? OK, if you can't remember back that far, then imagine it. All those new faces and names. Bluffing your way through the first few days. It's a rough time.

But it's also the steward's prime time to build the union among workers who may not even know what a union is. And it's a great opportunity to use social media to stay in touch with new members and build a sense of community.

HAVE A PLAN

Research shows that workers form their opinions about their union often within the first few days on the job. How do you approach new workers?

■ On the first day, does anyone from the union greet new workers? *If so, good!*

The union should establish itself right away, offering a friendly, welcoming introduction to the workplace.

■ Are new employees introduced to the union by a request for permission to deduct dues? *If so, bad!* Wouldn't they rather hear all the

good about the union, and how it works to improve their lives both on and off the job, before hearing what it's going to cost?

■ Who tells new workers where the bathrooms are, or which vending machine steals money and which one gives two Pepsi's for the price of one? If your answer is "I don't know," you've got some room for improvement.

You can greet new workers at a union negotiated new employee orientation session (yes, you can negotiate this into your contract) or during a break, and you can



“The way you frame issues in that first conversation with a new worker can make the difference...”

always share where to meet at lunchtime or after work to talk more freely. Be sure to invite new workers to text you so you can stay in touch better in the future.

Your union orientation packet should include:

- a contract, with a short summary of the latest improvements
- information about how to find worksite leaders, with their photos
- a schedule of union meetings, Facebook and Instagram addresses
- a letter of introduction from the union

REMINDERS ABOUT ATTITUDE

The way you frame issues in that first conversation with a new worker can make the difference between someone who relates the union to problems, dues and strikes, and someone who sees the union as a group of people working together to

improve their working lives. So when you talk about the union, you're defining what the union is. It's best not to focus solely on problems ("If you get in trouble, contact me") and better to emphasize solutions ("Through negotiations, we've been able to keep a really good vacation schedule").

For example, there's that familiar approach, Union—Good Guy and Management—Bad Guy. Remember, a new employee has no reason to think the smiling face who just gave him a job is a bad guy. So, while you could say, "Management tried to rip us off but we threatened to strike and the greedy jerks backed down," you'll build more credibility if you try this instead: "The company pushed real hard for a wage freeze last time, but we wouldn't accept that and they finally saw the light." Workers will learn for themselves who to trust and who not to trust.

—Suzan Erem. The writer is a veteran union organizer now building economic justice for family farmers through the Sustainable Iowa Land Trust.

Start the New Year Right!

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The OPEIU Free College program is excited to offer new courses to OPEIU members and their dependents, beginning with the Spring 2019 semester. Through the program, all OPEIU members can earn an associate's degree in an array of fields, with new areas of study that include:

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